

George MacDonald's *The Portent*: A Scottish Gothic Romance

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George MacDonald (1824-1905) is especially well known for his novels which clearly prefigure the genre of fantasy in the 20th century and beyond, such as *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (1858) and *Lilith: A Romance* (1895). However, among his 'fantasy' works, there is one that has often been neglected — *The Portent* (1864).¹ The significance of this work lies in what it reveals about MacDonald in its constitutive motifs and generic concerns in the early 1860s. *The Portent* was first serialized in *Cornhill Magazine* (May, June, July, 1860), before being released in book form, at nearly double the original length in 1864, with the full title, *The Portent: A Story of the Inner Vision of the Highlanders, Commonly Called The Second Sight*.² This edition was published alongside *Adela Cathcart* (a novel with a collection of short stories and fairy tales) following the five-year blank period between *Phantastes* and *David Elginbrod* (1863).³ Just after MacDonald completed the draft of *Phantastes*, his first book length piece of prose, in January 1858, his beloved brother John fell ill and died in July, which was followed by his father's sudden death in August (Triggs 70-72). While these deaths distressed the author, they nonetheless provided him the opportunity to turn his thoughts afresh towards home, Scotland.

In *The Portent*, the author employs the legendary motifs of his homeland. He transforms the 'Highland' motif known as 'second sight' into 'second hearing,' an auditory faculty to perceive an illusory sound or auditory hallucination haunted by the past, in the form of the recurring clank of a loose horseshoe heard by the protagonists, functioning as an omen within the tale. The author was also inspired by traditional ballads, which provided him with some clues on how to develop the story's plot. With these influences in mind, I argue that *The Portent* is a text which attempts to balance representation of a

Scottish cultural identity with the pursuit of a new form of 'romance.' In pursuit of this aim, it also catered to the popular fictional framework of Scottish folklore, which was in search of a more literary narrative form during the mid-Victorian period. This balance is motivated by his concern for both specific narrative techniques and his reflections on how to blend Scottish elements in original fiction.

'The second sight,' a psychic mythical phenomenon most strongly associated with the Scottish Highlands, is the main source of inspiration for *The Portent*. In *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, Samuel Johnson describes second sight as "an impression made either by the mind upon the eye, or by the eye upon the mind, by which things distant or future are perceived" (88).⁴ One example Johnson gives includes a man who falls from his horse during a journey and bleeds on the ground (89), similar to the description of the Highlands seeress in *The Portent*, who predicts the protagonist Duncan's fall from his horse and injury (21). Michael Newton explains second sight as "a curse and not a blessing which could come unasked for" (251) and how the future events it portends vary from the ill, such as the death of a member of community, to the less grim, such as "signs foretelling the arrival of travelers" (251-2). Johnson also describes the 'pleasing incidents' of second sight, such as a servant describing his master's attendant's attire without having ever seen it (90). While second sight is not necessarily confined to the sinister, MacDonald adopted the ominous side of this motif transforming it into a hallucinatory 'second hearing,' by which the protagonist is threatened.

MacDonald's family had experienced a notable episode related to second sight. His son Greville records his own grandfather's experience of seeing John MacDonald (the brother of George MacDonald) in his father's biography.

A few days after the burial [of John], my grandfather was at dusk going out at a little gate that opened from the farm precincts to a back road running up on to the moor, and saw a figure coming towards this gate. He stepped back within the gate. The figure passed on, but then turned, and my grandfather saw it was John, with plaid over his shoulder in his customary manner. The old man hastened after, but, because of his lameness, failed to overtake the wayfarer before he disappeared at a bend

of the ascending road. (293)

While MacDonald's father supposedly seeing his dead son can be criticized as the grandmother's fabrication for her grandson, Greville, it nonetheless testifies to the family's great concern for the mythical power of foresight. (In the Victorian period, such psychic phenomenon had at least a pseudo-scientific status.) It could be seen as an instance of second sight, predicting his own father's sudden death following the incident. The grandmother may have told the same story to her own son, George MacDonald, and so second sight may have been a theme the novelist wanted to adopt in his work sooner or later. The figures that evoke his deceased father and brother also appear in the earlier work *Phantastes*, but not in an outstanding way. *Phantastes* is a dreamlike romance of a protagonist whose nationality and background are blurry. It makes no direct reference to Scotland, aside from the mythic framework in which a human being visits a fairy-land and returns to the original world. This makes it all the more notable that MacDonald consciously uses the ostensibly Scottish Highlands motif of second sight in *The Portent*.

The Portent has a preface addressed to MacDonald's relative Duncan McColl.⁵ In the preface, MacDonald is hesitant to depict second sight, as follows:

In offering you a story, however, founded on The Second Sight, the belief in which was common to our ancestors, I owe you, at the same time, an apology. For the tone and colour of the story are so different from those naturally belonging to a Celtic tale, that you might well be inclined to refuse my request, simply on the ground that your pure Highland blood revolted from the degenerate embodiment given to the ancient belief. (v)

MacDonald imagines that his relative's "pure Highland blood" would be revolting from the form of his narrative. What does that make his own blood then? As a writer whose origins lie in the Scottish Highlands, it was an option to use material related to his own ancestral identity. "For surely it is one of the worst signs of a man to turn his back upon the rock whence he was hewn" (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 319), he writes as a rebuttal to criticism against *The Portent* in *The Spectator* magazine. The narrator Duncan in *The Portent*

repeatedly reminds the reader that the old nurse speaks in Gaelic (14, 103, 123). “Of course she spoke in Gaelic,” he says, and ‘of course’ may entail both a certain sense of pride and impassable distance from his ancestral Scottish Gaelic culture, as the author himself also does not have a full command of the ancient language. His depiction of second sight displays a mixture of affection and reverence for his ancestral origins, in addition to pursuing the literary need to create something unique and original, albeit perhaps commercial motivation to achieve popular success could not be denied.

Incorporating the mystical phenomenon of ‘second sight’ raises the issue of narrative genre. John Murray Smith, the publisher of *Phantastes*, recommended that MacDonald write novels, but the real problem was what kind of ‘novel’ they should be. The preface again contains intriguing statements illustrative of MacDonald’s doubts over his choice of narrative mode. He expresses these thus: “And permit me to say a few words about the story. It is a Romance. I am well aware that, with many readers, this epithet will be enough to ensure condemnation. But there ought to be a place for any story, which although founded in the marvelous, is true to human nature and to itself” (iii).⁶ Romance, in this context, could be generally defined as a story depicting unrealistic events and adventures. Here, there is a slight disruption in his creative attitude. Although he believed in the power of the marvelous romance which is ‘true to human nature,’ he shows hesitation over the literary medium. The ‘romance’ over which MacDonald hesitates is one in which elements of the supernatural appear. The term ‘marvelous’ appears twice more in the preface, when he defends the amount of the ‘marvelous’ in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the works of Shakespeare. The OED defines ‘marvelous’ as ‘having remarkable or extraordinary (and as if supernatural) properties’ or ‘concerned with the supernatural’, and so the adjective can connote the supernatural, in addition to merely describing something surprising and extraordinary.

Beginning with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole, the genealogy of gothic romance that uses elements of the preternatural continued in the 19th-century British novel. The direct use of the supernatural, such as a huge flying helmet or a moving figure in a painting in Walpole’s story, was avoided by Ann Radcliffe who placed more importance on arousing terror and aesthetics of sublime than supernatural spectacles. This resulted in her

exposing the tricks of the ostensibly supernatural, known as the explained supernatural. However, the review of *The Portent* in *The Athenaeum* (18 June 1864) has a positive opinion of the elements of the ‘marvelous,’ about which MacDonald was apprehensive:

There was no need for the semi-apologetic preface prefixed by Mr. MacDonald to his romance. There is no style of novel gone by, beyond the power of rehabilitation. A straightforward, good ghost story would be just as acceptable now as were ‘The Mysteries of Udolpho’ and ‘The Family of Montorio’, though in both of these works, the error was committed of not implicitly trusting to the supernatural, but of explaining away the terror. (834-5)

This passage confirms that, despite MacDonald’s anxiety over condemnation, the supernatural elements of the mid-Victorian gothic romance were actually favoured in the literary market, with obvious examples of telepathy between Jane Eyre and Rochester; let alone the ghosts of Cathy and Heathcliff wandering the moor.

The gothic remained an available and commercially lucrative option throughout. One of the offspring of the gothic romance is the sensation novel, whose representative work, Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1860), would have provided MacDonald with some precedent, thanks to its depiction of the ghostly woman in white, and her seeming madness, in addition to its use of imprisonment caused by an inheritance plot.⁷ In the preceding decades onwards into the 1850s, prior to *The Portent*, Charlotte Bronte wrote the social novel *Shirley* (1849), while she also produced the more romantic *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853). Likewise, while Dickens wrote social realist novels such as *Hard Times* (1854), he also produced novels using the supernatural, such as *A Christmas Carol* (1843). In the London literary world of this period, MacDonald, who had just started his writing career, struggled for a suitable literary medium.

Francis Russell Hart states that in MacDonald’s novels “the fantastic and the normal, the ideal and the real, are separated only by semivisible and shifting boundaries” (101). The proximity of ‘the fantastic and the normal’ is notably found in *The Portent*, recurring later in *At the Back of the North Wind*

(1871) in which the supernatural being North Wind intervenes in the child Diamond's realistic life in London. The structure of the former is such that the realm of Scottish legends and the protagonist Duncan's real life are combined, with the gothic element of 'second hearing' depicted in an otherwise realistic setting in which Duncan travels to a Hilton Hall in England and works as a tutor. The use of second sight can also be found in Scott's *A Legend of Montrose* (1819), by which *The Portent* may have been inspired. While MacDonald depicts traditional second sight in his story, he also modifies it to create 'second hearing.'

'Second hearing' is used as a supernatural gothic device in *The Portent*. Duncan is not frightened by the things he perceives with his eyes or visual imagination, even though he hears the dreadful tales of a Highlands nursery (4). In bed at night, it is his custom to imagine his room peopled with dead persons whom he remembers (4-5). On the other hand, his auditory perception is extraordinarily sharp. If he inadvertently removes one of his fingers from his ears, the possibility of hearing a supernatural sound causes 'the agony of terror': "I can compare it to nothing but the rushing in upon my brain of a whole churchyard of spectres" (5). Whether the sound is an exaggeration of the noise around him, or a pure auditory hallucination, is not clearly defined, but the unpleasant sensation which is likened to the spectres rushing in on his brain seems to be the inner noise that harasses his psyche. The origin of this auditory deviation is explained, "the prophetic power manifest in the gift of second sight, which according to the testimony of my old nurse, had belonged to several of my ancestors, had been in my case transformed in kind without losing its nature, transferring its abode from the sight to the hearing" (6). This variant of second sight makes the gothic fear-arousing effect more potent than second sight because aural perception is more acutely and painfully felt than visual one. At the same time, it constitutes an indispensable device for connecting his auditory perception to the sound of the clanking horseshoe from the local legend that foreshadows later developments.

Duncan's second hearing is rooted in the legend of two brothers. One day, the villainous brother becomes crazed and kills the other after noticing that their mutual friend, a beautiful orphan girl, loves his brother and not himself. The villainous brother robs the woman, but she dies when his horse tramples her long hair and drags her along with them. The next day, the sinful man, the

woman, and the horse are found dead at the bottom of a valley. One of the horse's shoes was said to have been loose. The eerie sound Duncan hears is implied to be the clank of the loose shoe. (14-18)

The use of local legends in fiction was attempted by earlier writers as well. In Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), for example, the legend of one of the Lords of Ravenswood, in which the Lord falls in love with a nymph-like lady, who mysteriously disappears into red bubbling water, has been interpreted by later generations as a realistic tale of a woman who was killed by the Lord in a fit of jealousy (Scott *Bride* 39-40). The fantastic scope is limited, as Scott suggests that "the exhibition of supernatural appearances in fictitious narrative ought to be rare, brief, indistinct" (Scott *Supernatural* 55). The structure of the narrated past and subjective present is similar to that of *The Portent*, but in the later work the realistic tragedy is fantasized and uncannily romanticized. The old nurse tells Duncan that the villainous brother "shall carry about for ages the phantom-body of the girl" (18), and tells a communally embellished version of the tale:

They say, likewise, that the lady's hair is still growing [...] till the Last Day, when the horse will falter and her hair will gather in; and the horse will fall, and the hair will twist, and twine, and wreath itself like a mist of threads about him, and blind him to everything but her. Then the body will rise up within it, face to face with him, animated by a fiend, who twining her arms around him, will drag him down to the bottomless pit. (19)

The fantastic mood is amplified by the symbolic use of imagery such as the woman's excessively long hair 'like a mist of threads', a fiend, and a bottomless pit. This densely fantasized nature is characteristic of MacDonald's myth-making. In other words, legend is not reduced to a realistic interpretation, but realistic events in the legend are in turn romanticized.

The ancient narrative told by the nurse is not confined to the distant past, but invades Duncan's present. After she finishes the story, Duncan hears the clank of a horse shoe approaching the cottage, and soon a visitor appears, "A knock came to the door, and, on opening it, we saw an old man seated on a horse, with a long slenderly-filled sack lying across the saddle before him" (19). The image of the man on horseback from the nurse's tale is here

superimposed. The rider, though old, seems to be regarded as the villainous brother's evil spirit, while the reader may be tempted to imagine that the dead body of the girl is inside the 'long slenderly-filled sack'. Despite Duncan's comment that "we see around us only what is within us" (19), which should be interpreted as a cautionary measure deriving from MacDonald's anxiety over possible criticism of his bold use of fantasy, the old nurse describes the visitor, who asks for directions and leaves as a supernatural being:

[...] wizard as he is, with his disguises. I can see him through them all. Duncan, my dear, when you suspect anything, do not be too incredulous. This human demon is of course a wizard still, and knows how to make himself, as well as anything he touches, take a quite different appearance from the real one; only every appearance must bear some resemblance, however distant, to the natural form. That man you saw at the door was the phantom of which I have been telling you. (20)

The man galloping away looks to Duncan's eyes to be "an airy, pale-grey spectre" (21). He again hears the upsetting sound of the horse's loose shoe. The horseback spectre may evoke the image of Tam Lin, a bewitching man riding on a horse in the Scottish traditional ballad.⁸

So far, we have seen that the motif of second sight reflects on the writer's Highlands origins and choice of narrative mode. The inspirations for *The Portent*, however, should not be confined to the Scottish tradition of second sight. MacDonald also found inspiration in ballads. The most important embodiment of these narrative elements is Lady Alice, MacDonald's version of the woman in white.

Lady Alice is not vividly characterized as a realistic individual. When he sees her in the garden for the first time, she appears as a white ghost. She is a solitary figure in the Hilton household, treated almost as if she does not exist. Bereaved by her parents, her position in the Hiltons is unstable. She is said to have a distant connection to Lord Hilton, but her genealogy is obscure. *The Athenaeum* claims that "the heroine is not distinctly present to us" (835). However, what is more important is not her characterization through a psychological realism, but her role as a repository of cultural memory. Alice sings a ballad which she has learned from her Scottish nurse. It is actually

MacDonald's own creation, but is based on traditional ballads.

Annie was dowie, an' Willie was wae
What can be the matter wi' siccan a twae?
For Annie was bonnie's the first o' the day
And Willie was strang an' honest an' gay

Oh! The tane had a daddy was poor an' was proud;
An' the tither a Minnie that cared for the gowd
They lo'ed ane anither, an' said their say—
But the daddy an' Minnie hae partit the twae (69)

An inspiration for this ballad may be 'Sweet Willie And Fair Annie' which begins as follows:

Sweet Willie and fair Annie
Sat a' day on a hill,
And, though they had sitten seven year,
They ne'er had talked their fill.

Sweet Willie said a word in haste;
Fair Annie took it ill:
'O, I will never wed a wife,
Against my parents' will.' (Chambers 269)

Willie consults his mother about two candidates for his bride:

There are twa maidens in a bouir;
Which o' them shall I bring?
The nut-brown maid has sheep and kye,
And fair Annie has nane.

'O an ye wed the nut-brown maid,
I'll heap gold wi' my hand;
But an ye wed her, fair Annie,

I'll straik it wi' a wand.' (270)

Although MacDonald's ballad and this one are apparently different in their use of motifs and characters, the basic idea that Willie and Annie are severed in consequence of their parents' greed is similar. This point could be linked to Lord Hilton's plotting to confiscate Alice's inheritance in *The Portent* (he is her guardian and intercepts the elopement of the two lovers). That Annie and Willie are separated in the ballad sung by Alice might imply that she and Duncan are actually biological twins, considering that a bright star is depicted in the sky when each of them was born (24, 90). Alice's identity is obscure, but her connection with Scotland is evident in her singing the Scottish ballad. This link with Duncan is also evident in the scene in which Alice sings in his dream:

I was in bed in a castle, on the seashore; the wind came from the sea in chill eerie soughs, and the waves fell with a threatful tone upon the beach, muttering many maledictions as they rushed up, and whispering cruel portents as they drew back, hissing and gurgling, through the million narrow ways of the pebbly ramparts; and I knew that a maiden in white was standing in the cold wind, by the angry sea, singing...(71)

Details like 'threatful tone,' 'muttering many maledictions' and the 'whispering cruel portents' of the waves suggest that Alice and Duncan share the curse. This theory is strengthened when Alice confesses that she also hears the sound of the horse's shoe, and says to him, "there is a connection between your family and mine, somewhere far back in their histories?" (85) The ballad she sings is mentioned to be a part of 'Annie of Lochroyan'. This seems to be a reference to the ballad 'The Lass of Lochryan'.⁹

The latter half of the ballad in *The Portent* is quite similar to some lines in this ballad. Alice sings thus:

Love Gregory started frae his sleep,
And to his mother did say:
'I dreamed a dream this night, mither,

That maks my heart right wae.

'I dreamed that Annie of Lochroyan,
The flower of a' her kin,
Was standing mournin' at my door,
But nane wad let her in.' (71)

The image of Alice standing alone at the door of Duncan's room sleepwalking (72) parallels to the image of the woman, in the ballad, who knocks on Gregory's door but is not let in.

The 1860 *Cornhill* version ends the story with this passage: "I shall find her...Till then, my soul is but a moon-lighted chamber of ghosts; and I sit within, the dreariest of them all. When she enters, it will be a home of love; And I wait—I wait" (*Cornhill* 83). On the other hand, MacDonald added a peaceful conclusion to the 1864 version. Beyond this solitary and bleak finish, with their reunion uncertain, MacDonald also added other new episodes to the 1864 version: Doctor Ruthwell's treatment of Duncan's sabre-cut wound on his forehead; Duncan's return to his village in Scotland, where the old nurse tells him Alice is still alive; the rescue of Alice from Hilton Hall; and their marriage in Scotland followed by their life of "peace and hope" (160). Glenn Edward Sadler claims that one reason MacDonald included the earthly reunion of the two characters was because he 'felt the pressure of his Victorian reading public' to use a happy ending. He also claims that MacDonald was compelled by a 'deep commitment to marital bliss (the fairy-tale ending) and the fantasies of his own life, dating from his childhood' (xxii). Rebecca Thomas Ankeny, however, is not convinced by these explanations, and suggests that 'he [MacDonald] considered the first version to imply a reunion; it is quite similar to the ending of *Lilith* [...] in which the hero is waiting for death to reunite him with his lost love. The second version moves the reunion into time and continues it into eternity' (30).

If we consider the background of the protagonist 'Duncan Campbell', however, another reading may be possible from a historical perspective. John Docherty writes: 'the narrator describes his father as a Campbell "of long descent," and no MacDonald proud of his ancestry- as George MacDonald certainly was – would make a Campbell the hero of a tale' (19-20), and notes

the fact that ‘Duncan is a Campbell is not revealed until part three’ in the first version of *The Portent* (22), suggesting some subtlety involved in treating the historical implications. Duncan’s surname can surely be seen as arbitrary and both Campbell and MacDonald are common Scottish names, but the former could also be reference to what might be described as the MacDonald’s opponents in Scottish history.¹⁰ MacDonald traces his ancestry to the MacDonalds of Glencoe, whose chief could not take an oath of allegiance to William of Orange by December 31, 1691, after the Catholic Stuart James VII approved the Highlands clans acknowledging the sovereignty of the Protestant king.¹¹ As a punishment for this delay, soldiers led by Archibald Campbell, 10th earl of Argyll (Campbell of Glenlyon), were ordered to betray the hospitality of the MacDonalds and slaughter them in the glen. This incident cast a dark shadow over the MacDonalds’ history. In *The Portent*, Duncan informs the reader of his identity at the beginning of the story: “My father belonged to the widespread family of the Campbells, and possessed a small landed property in the north of Argyll” (1). Since his background is thus revealed, the following description of a mountain Duncan sees from his hermit’s cave may assume an allusion to the MacDonald clan: ‘I saw this mountain before me. Very different was its character from that of the hill on which I was seated. It was a mighty thing, a chieftain of the race, seamed and scarred’ (3). The mountain is a threatening presence associated with the dark legend. It is a ‘terror-haunted mountain’(4) from which he hears ‘the sound as of the iron-shod hoofs of a horse, in furious gallop’ (8). However, as the story evolves towards the end, Duncan hears the sound no more and says: ‘Did the ghostly rider still haunt the place? or if he did, should I hear again that sound of coming woe? Whether or not, I defied him’ (102). By granting a happy ending to a Campbell man, MacDonald may be self-consciously engaging with the Campbell clan’s historical involvement in the notorious Massacre of Glencoe, hoping to transcend their violent past. This history may have provided material for creating this peculiar gothic romance by a Scottish writer pursuing literary success in Victorian England.

Looking at the novel structure, *The Portent* is the text where MacDonald’s most interesting creative efforts are on display. Although he shows hesitation over the choice of narrative mode, the Highland motif second sight, its variation ‘second hearing’, and ballads enabled him to create an

original gothic romance. The composition of *The Portent* overlaps with the time in which he wrote his first ‘realistic’ novel, *David Elginbrod*, the hero of which is a male tutor as Duncan Campbell. So *The Portent* could be seen as a turning point in his writing career, after which he departs from the entirely fantastical work *Phantastes* and stays within the confines of novels written in realist mode (except fairy tales for children), at least until he returns to fantasy in his later years with *Lilith*.

Notes

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1 Although some critics have briefly commented on *The Portent* (Greville MacDonald 318, Triggs 79, Manlove 89), little formal analysis of the novel’s components has been attempted. William Raeper writes, ‘It tells a spooky tale of Highland second sight and a mysterious sleepwalking girl. In 1864 it was published in book form with a significantly different ending’ (164). Rebecca Thomas Ankeny considers the effects of this different ending. Ankeny demonstrates that the change of the ending alters the overall textual shape, particularly with regard to the meanings of the portent and its determinism as well as adding to poignancy of perceptions and memories of the main characters. She also suggests that in the 1864 version, because the protagonist Duncan places distance from his own past by retelling and questioning his story controlled by the portent, the narrative moves from a mythical pattern to a provisional world of fiction (25-27).

2 The first version has a fictional preface addressed to a doctor to whom the narrator entrusts the manuscript of his story. This preface is cut in the 1864 version.

3 MacDonald wrote a play ‘If I Had a Father’ (1859), and a novel *Seekers and Finders* (presumably 1860-62), but they were rejected by publishers (Triggs 78-79, 81).

4 I owe this finding on Johnson’s account of second sight to Hideichi Eto.

5 John Docherty states that Duncan MacColl was “a distant relative and close friend” of MacDonald and also “a doctor” (19). Looking at a genealogical tree of the MacDonalds provided by Triggs, his stepmother Margaret MacDonald was formerly MacColl (viii).

6 MacDonald may have referred to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), in which the American romancer discusses ‘Romance’ as a genre different from ‘Novel’.

7 Sensation novels seem to play with the supernatural by giving only a general sense of it but avoid explicit use of it, unlike *The Portent*. MacDonald writes elsewhere in the preface, that his work is ‘undeserving of being classed with what are commonly called *sensation novels*’ (vi).

8 See, for example, ‘Tam Lin’ (Childe 340-58); ‘The Young Tamlane’ (Chambers 209-217).

9 See Chambers 230.

10 Docherty notes that this observation is made in F. Hal Broome’s unpublished doctoral thesis “The Science-Fantasy of George MacDonald” (Edinburgh University 1985).

11 The facts are drawn from Raeper (15-16) and *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

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